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ABSTRACT

Women are underrepresented on local school boards. In a 1975 national survey, one-third of all school board members reported that not a single woman was serving on their school board. The research suggests that the presence of women on local boards of education contributes in a meaningful way to a healthier, more realistic, and open atmosphere of decision-making. Boards with at least two women members were less likely to conceal the decision-making process from the public and did, in fact, have more internal conflict. Women respondents emphasized the importance of "hearing complaints and grievances of parents" and "maintaining contact with state and federal legislators" substantially more than did their male counterparts. A survey of school superintendents found that most had negative opinions about women school board members. Suggestions are made for actions to combat sex discrimination in this area. (Author/MLF)

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SCHOOL BOARDS AND SEX DISCRIMINATION: PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Paul D. Blanchard

Did you know that women are underrepresented on local school boards? Dr. Blanchard points out that this hurts school boards, women and students. The author's research suggests that women board members are more sensitive to community needs. Women tend to be more open about the school board's decision-making process. School boards on which women serve are more likely to have conflicts, also.

A survey of school superintendents found that most of them had negative opinions about women school board members. The author makes some provocative suggestions for actions to combat sex discrimination in this area.

Many educators have expressed concern recently about the underrepresentation of women in school administration.[1]

Sexual imbalance in the hiring and promotion of educational administrators seems to reflect a discriminatory attitude on the part of current school administrators and those who appoint them. A similar and related problem involves the underrepresentation of women on local boards of education.

A commission appointed by the National School Boards Association (NSBA) found that in 1972 only about 12% of the nation's school board members were women. In Kentucky, the situation is even worse — only about 5% of Kentucky's school board members in 1972 were women. In a national study of school board members conducted for NSBA in 1975, I found that one-third of all board members reported that not a single woman was serving on their school board. Another one-third of the boards had only one member. In the 1972 study of 532 boards of education, NSBA found only 14 boards with more women than men.

Why is the underrepresentation of women on school boards a problem in American education? The NSBA Commission on the Role of Women in Educational Governance suggests three major reasons:

1. School Boards are not well served by this imbalance, for women who serve on school boards frequently bring interests, perspectives and capabilities to the board which differ from those of their male peers and enhance the effectiveness of the school board.
2. Women are not well served by this imbalance for service on school boards is an enriching and rewarding experience from which women school board members profit as well as men.
3. Students are not well served by this imbalance, for as schools are devoted to the education of the nation's future citizens, and as this nation is committed to equal opportunity for all citizens, it is crucial that children (as well as adults) see women acting in leadership roles.[2]

The NSBA Commission also noted that the talents and abilities of women school board members are comparable to, and sometimes superior to, those of men school board members. For example, some women are able to devote more time to school board service and they have more leadership experience prior to school board service.

My own research revealed other meaningful differences between men and women school board members.[3] In a survey administered to a national sample of more than 1,000 school board members, male and female respondents gave similar answers to most of the questions. However, a few significant differences emerged in their attitudes toward representation and decision-making. For example, when asked about the responsibilities of a school board member which were most important, women respondents emphasized the importance of "hearing complaints and grievances of parents" and "maintaining contact with state and federal legislators" substantially more than their male counterparts. This seems to indicate among the women a sensitivity to community needs and desires, and an orientation to communicate with important constituencies outside of the educational world to a greater extent than among male board members. This is extremely significant given that school boards have been criticized for their failure to genuinely represent their communities.

Other items in the survey involved board members' relationships to interest groups in the school district. Responses to these questions revealed a somewhat ambivalent attitude of women toward these groups. On the one hand, women more often than men were likely to be contacted by representatives of interest groups. This finding is consistent with earlier findings about the responsiveness of women board members to district needs and demands. On the other hand, women were less likely than men to initiate contact with groups to try to gain support for a specific policy. Apparently large numbers of women are uncomfortable with such a strategy, possibly because they find it to be an unacceptable part of their role, or perhaps because they are too inexperienced to know which groups to contact or the most effective method of initiating such contact.

The 1975 survey revealed two areas of the decision-making process upon which women board members seemed to have a significant impact. One important finding was that boards with at least two women members were less likely to conceal the decision-making process from the public. Board members with less than two women on their board were much more likely to report that the board voted unanimously on an important issue, *despite disagreement* among board members. As Norman Kerr has pointed out, by voting

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unanimously, a school board conceals from the public any of the arguments which might have been made against the decision.[4] However, the presence of women on the board appears to discourage this pattern of concealment in a significant way, and "open up" the decision-making process to public view.

The second important impact of women on school boards is closely related to the first. Besides not attempting to conceal the internal conflict which existed, boards with at least two women on them did, in fact, have more internal conflict. Internal conflict on school boards may be consistent and long-term or it may be random and spasmodic, but boards with more women were more likely to have one type of conflict or the other. The consequences of this decisional factor are extremely significant, for many observers believe that school board conflict is inevitable, and that boards without conflict are probably not doing a conscientious job of responding to the diverse opinions of the people they represent and are less likely to be giving adequate time to deliberation over various alternatives which are available for a given decision. Thus, my research suggests that the presence of women on local boards of education contributes in a meaningful way to a healthier, more realistic and open atmosphere of decision-making.

What Can Be Done?

Before addressing the question of what can be done to increase the number of female school board members, we need to consider the question of what obstacles exist to women seeking to serve on local boards of education. There appears to be one major obstacle — *attitude*. There is some evidence to suggest that the electorate is prejudiced against women serving as school board members. But there is much more evidence indicating that school administrators, especially superintendents, are prejudiced against women board members. And most Kentucky educators realize that superintendents can be very influential in whether or not a board member is elected in their school districts.

One Boston-area superintendent characterized women school board members as follows in a statement to **The American School Board Journal:**

> By and large, women on school committees (school boards) are nitpicking, emotional, use wiles to get what they want, demand to be treated as equals, but have no hesitancy at all to put on the pearls and insist on "respect" when the going gets rough — and they talk too much.

While it might be argued that this kind of opinion does not represent the feeling of most school superintendents, **The American School Board Journal** staff found that a majority of superintendents they surveyed expressed similar sentiments.

"... My research suggests that the presence of women on local school boards contributes in a meaningful way to a healthier, more realistic and open atmosphere of decision-making."

This attitude toward women board members becomes a more serious obstacle under certain conditions. The NSBA Commission study described an "informal quota system" which operated to the disadvantage of women candidates. Interviews with hundreds of board members revealed that it was much more difficult for a woman candidate to be appointed or elected to a school board if a woman or women serving on that school board. Other observers have noted similar quota systems on state boards of education, college boards of trustees and in school district administrative systems.

What can be done? Because of the nature of the problem, official, legal action would appear to be unwarranted and ill-advised. This writer, as a political scientist, would certainly not recommend tampering with the electoral system to guarantee some arbitrary quota of women school board members. Since *attitude* has been designated by most observers as the major obstacle to women seeking school board office, it seems obvious that current efforts should be concentrated toward changing the attitudes of key individuals and groups. The major educational groups in Kentucky, particularly the State Department of Education, the Kentucky Association of School Administrators, the Kentucky Schooal Boards Association, and (perhaps to a lesser extent) the Kentucky Education Association should confront the issue of the role of women in educational leadership, generally, and provide forums for discussing the specific problem of the

underrepresentation of women on school boards. These groups along with Colleges of Education should also disseminate available information to their members and constituents which demonstrates that female school board members have abilities at least equal to male board members. Superintendents, specifically, should be apprised of the need to encourage more women to run for school board office.

These recommendations are not made because of the belief that more women should be elected to school boards primarily because they are women; rather, they reflect a belief that women constitute a major pool of talented individuals which has only begun to be tapped for local educational leadership.[5] It is mandatory that this waste of human resources be corrected.

Notes

[1]Readers are referred to two recent issues of educational periodicals which have presented extensive discussions of this problem.

See *Phi Delta Kappan*, October, 1973 and *NASSP Bulletin*, April, 1976.

[2]National School Boards Association, *Women on School Boards* (Evanston: NSBA Research Division, 1974).

[3]For more information, see Paul D. Blanchard, "Women in Public Education: The Impact of Female School Board Members," *Journal of Humanics*, 4 (forthcoming, 1977).

[4]Norman D. Kerr, "The School Board as an Agency of Legitimation," *Sociology of Education*, 38 (Fall, 1964), pp. 34-59.

[5]This belief is also expressed by the NSBA Commission on the Role of Women in Educational Governance.

Author's Note:

Dr. Blanchard is currently serving as Associate Professor of Political Science at Eastern Kentucky University where he has taught since 1970. He holds degrees from the University of Michigan and Southern Illinois University, and earned his doctorate at the University of Kentucky. Blanchard has written and spoken frequently on the topic of school board decision-making; he has addressed convention clinics of the National School Boards Association, the South Carolina School Boards Association, and the Kentucky School Boards Association.

Besides teaching at Eastern Kentucky University, Blanchard has held short-term appointments at the University of South Carolina and Auburn University at Montgomery. During the 1975-76 academic year, he served as a dissemination specialist with the South Carolina Department of Education.